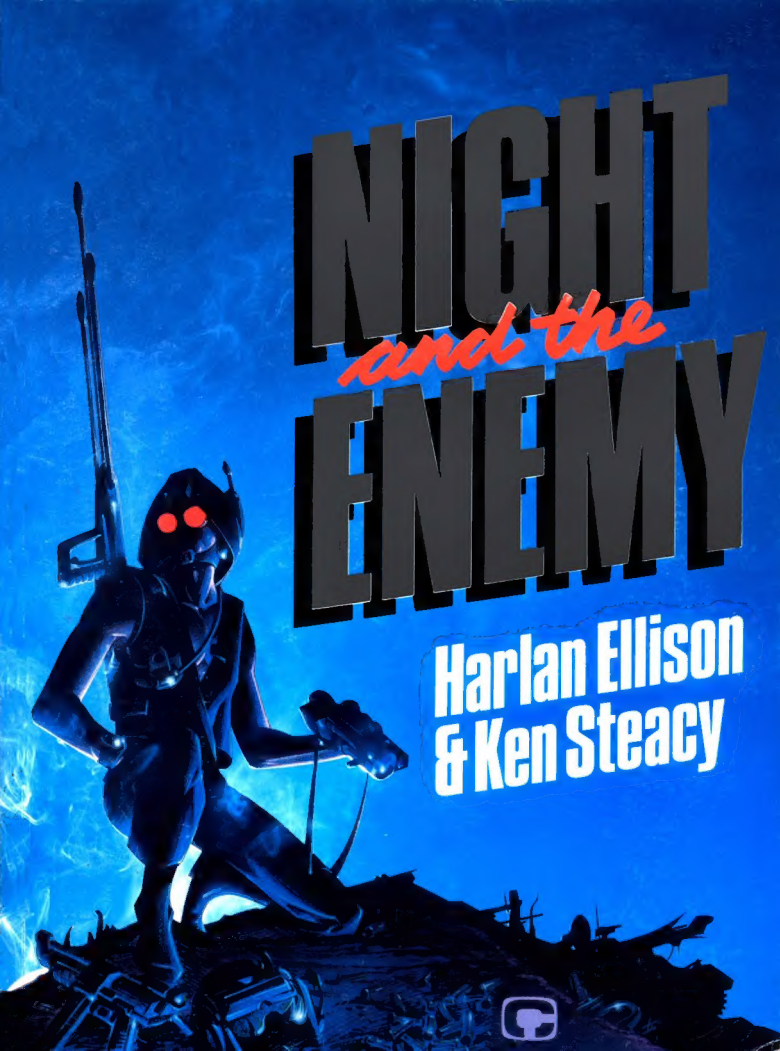
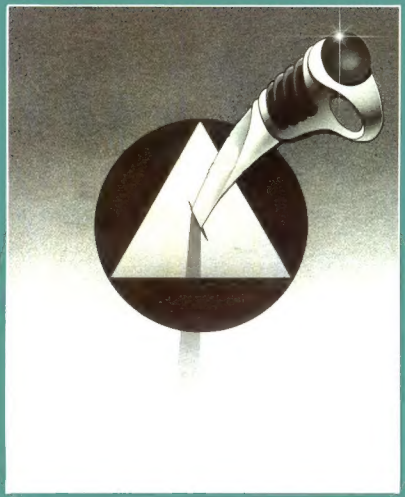

NIGHT
and the
ENEMY
Harlan Ellison
& Ken Steacy



# WHISPERS
## FROM THE TELLING BOX

In thirty-five years as a writer, I have never written a sequel to one of my stories. I *hate* sequels. Nothing in the current publishing fashion saddens me more than the seemingly endless *tsunami* of sequels, trilogies, dekalogies and "shared universe" novels that has deluged the bookstalls these past half dozen years.

It's not difficult to understand *why* they sell: it's the same reason anthology shows on television draw a tiny audience, while dynastic primetime soap operas command huge ratings. The casual reader — or viewer — seeks familiarity, a comfortable sense of knowing what's going on, as you're going in. But that same need for comfortability contains the seed of rot that finally cancels all tv shows and eventually drives all but the most plebeian readers from a writer's work. Familiarity does, indeed, breed boredom . . . if not contempt.

Hell, even Tolstoi was able to do *War and Peace* in one volume; and though Proust's extraordinary lifework takes seven books in The Modern Library to tell the Guermantes' saga, it was as a single unbroken narrative that *Remembrance of Things Past* was conceived. And I think it hubris of an unconscionable sort for the authors of fantasy trilogies to validate their windy, bloated effusions by recourse to Tolstoi or Proust. If a story is worth telling, and it's told well . . . one book ought to suffice. What follow are almost always second-thoughts, rechewed spinach, shadowy five-finger exercises.

An affection for concision and telling a tale with a punch is probably why I've spent most of my career time in lengths of fiction shorter than the novel. And once having dealt with a subject and its characters, I feel I've said what had to be said. I've never wanted to go back and write another story about the Harlequin and the Ticktockman, or examine what befell that guy who had no mouth, but needed to scream.

Only twice have I ever released work that bore linkage with previous writings. The first is the periodic publication of sections of a long novel called *Blood's a Rover*, one part of which you may know as "A Boy and His Dog." But it was only by chance that "A Boy and His Dog" became so popular, and became a film. And that novella is merely a small section of the full work which — if the reaper don't cut me down — I'll get around to finishing sometime pretty soon.

The second instance involves the Earth-Kyba War stories that make up *Night and the Enemy*. Though I have written a new framing device for the five tales in this book, tying them together in a simulacrum of a "future history," they are not, in truth, linked by anything except the background of The War.

It was convenient, when I first became a professional writer, to use such a device. But it was never intended as anything more potent than a framework. An Orient Express, on which Agatha Christie could locate a murder. An intergalactic Ship of Fools against which I could examine the human stories (and alien stories) that interested me.

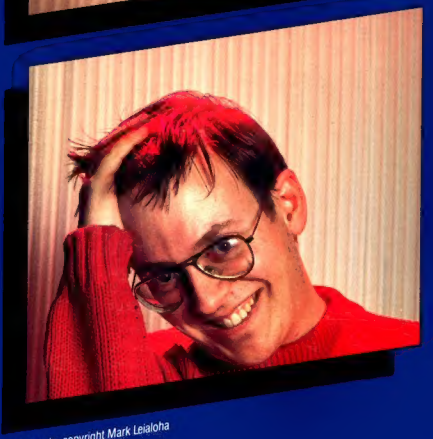
Now Ken Steacy has illustrated those five stories of The War, and done them so well that it may pique my interest in writing other, untold stories set against the backdrop of Earth's two hundred-year-long conflict with the golden Kyben. Those stories exist here, in my head (though I've discovered three or four more yarns not presented here, published years ago, in which the Kyben are mentioned or have minor walk-ons), and the Kyben are, of course, the villains of *Demon With a Glass Hand*. They are also — and you're getting the word here first — a major element of the two-hour television film I recently completed for Roger Corman and NBC. The movie is called *Cutter's World*, and if it does well, they tell me it will become a regular series.

Which may mean The Telling Box will speak again.

Harlan Ellison
September 1987

# Harlan Ellison

has been called "one of the great living American short story writers" (Washington Post) and "the 20th century Lewis Carroll" (Los Angeles Times). Hear his voice in NIGHT AND THE ENEMY.



# Ken Steacy

has been called "the wizard of the airbrush" (Paris-Match) and "a singular talent; one to keep an eye on" (New York Times). See through his eyes in NIGHT AND THE ENEMY.

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# NIGHT *and the* ENEMY

Harlan Ellison
& Ken Steacy

NIGHT AND THE ENEMY

WRITTEN BY
HARLAN ELLISON

ILLUSTRATED/DESIGNED BY
KEN STEACY

Published by Comico The Comic Company
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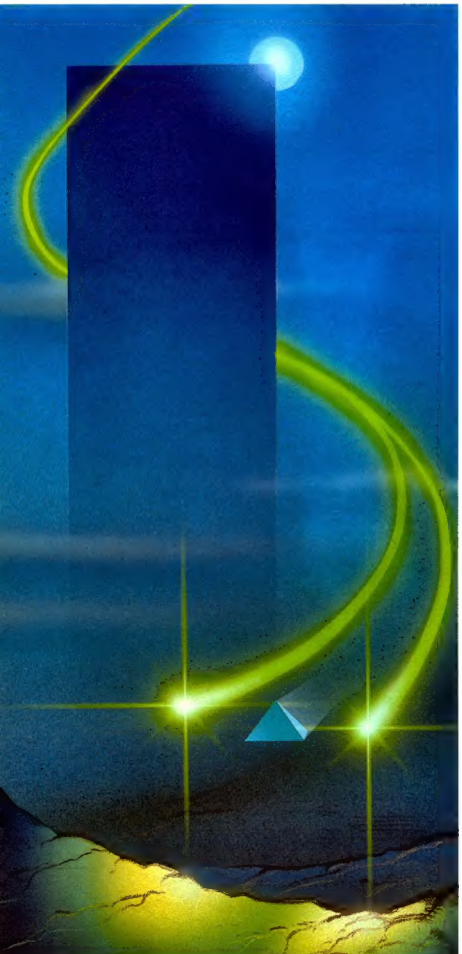
*They are lords and owners of their universe. As far as the photon can be flung, from the Coalsack to the Hub, from the Melting Ridge to Fornax, Cetus and Sculptor . . . they are all that abides of intelligent life. Once there were two species that sailed on the star-winds . . . humans birthed in the steaming ooze of the planet Earth . . . and the humanoid, but not human, Kyben whose home-world Kyba came to be the spawning ground of alien ambition.*

*And they met, and they fought. It should never have been; there was vastness and solitude for all, worlds beyond worlds that neither could have settled in twice ten billion years. But for each race there had been thousands of years of ethno-centricity, uncounted centuries of ego and rapacity, during which time nothing stood against them. And each race came to think it was The Noblest Experiment, masters of the cosmic ephemeris, rulers of the far starfields. So when they met, they bared their fangs . . . and went to war.*

*For two hundred years they laid waste to everything around them. And in the end, one destroyed the other. But which the vanquisher, and which the vanquished?*

*Now, five million years after the last battle between Earth and Kyba, on the world once known as Epsilon Indi IV, the descendants of those born to Earth . . or Kyba . . . have returned to the battlefield.*



*No longer human or humanoid, but so advanced they have done away with starships and inverspace teleportation and even their fleshy bodies, they return as motes of sentient light. On beams of luminescence that are elements of their own being.*

*A short time ago (as time is measured in the infinite eye) they found what was left of the Earth. In the ruins they found the Telling Boxes. One of the Telling Boxes held memories of the War, the Great Long War. Neither complete history nor studied explanation of how that War had come to be, the Telling Boxes contained random entries, snippets of life that transpired during those endless days.*

*As they spin webs between the suns, they absorb those moments of life lost by Kyban and Human: to ready themselves for the great discovery. On the last world of the final days of the War, they will translate back to their original forms. The only artifact they have retained from those former times, the transmat, will not function. It has always held the silent secret of their origin, but not even their power was sufficient to permit devolution. The Telling Box has provided the key. On Epsilon Indi IV they will find a power source that will activate the transmat. They will, at last, recover the truth of the myths about their origin. Which were the ancestors of these godlike burning lights? Humans or Kyben?*

# RUN FOR THE STARS

They found him hunkered down over the body of a fat shopkeeper. His back was to the blasted storefront and he didn't hear them come in. The scream of the Kyben ships scorching the city mingled too loudly with the screams of the dying.
STEACY ©81

Lemme go! He was dead! I only wanted money to buy food — honest to God, lemme go!
This is a grocery store, you ghoul! There's food all over.
There was no use arguing and he couldn't tell them the money was to get narcotics. The entire planet was under siege and looters were shot. Perhaps it was better that way; in death the insatiable craving for the dream-dust would stop, and he would be free. But the thought of death sent chills through his body, numbing his muscles.
This the best we can do, for chrissake? There's gotta be someone better!
No, Shep, I think this is our man. A dustie. Perfect. We've been looking all day for you, fella.
Whaddya want with me? Lemme go, willya!
Come on, we'll let Doc Budder go to work on him.
Behind them, the fat shopkeeper lay amidst the debris of his store, dead, safe, and uncaring.

Benno Tallant awoke during the operation. He promptly fainted again
When he awoke the second time he remembered abruptly
What was that? What have you done to me?
Why this snivelling garbage, Parkhurst? We've a dozen good men who would've volunteered.
Because the best job can be done by somebody who's afraid of the thing; someone who'll run.
Oh God, it hurts! All over here...do something!
Self-induced cramp. Stop whining, you slug! The epidermizer is healing you through the sheet; you haven't a thing to worry about — right now.
We'll be back. Don't try and get out. Aside from the fact that there's a guard on the door, you might open that incision and bleed to death before we find you.

Tallant's thoughts weren't deterred by the darkness. He remembered the dream-dust and the pains shot through him again, he remembered the past, and his mouth choked up, he remembered awakening during the operation and he wanted to scream. The next six hours were a bright, thrusting hell.

Shep came for him. He had one thing in common with the other men Tallant had seen — he was weak, to the core.

"Listen... does you know where I can lay my hands on some dream-dust...?"

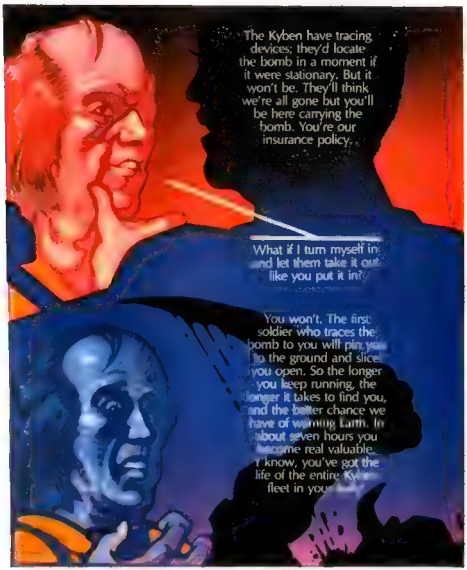
No, you listen to me.

About two million people are dead out there, almost the entire population of this planet, and you sit there asking me to get your snuff! If I had my way, I'd kick you to death right now — so don't say another word! **Now move it!**

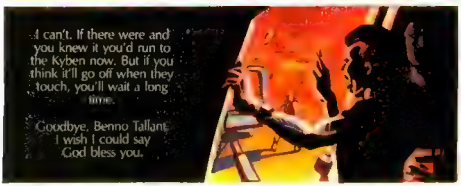
We owe you an explanation. This is the big push for the Kyben. We've got to warn Earth. The inverspace transmitters went when they burned the transpoles at the meridian. The only way we can get word home is to stall for time. That's why we need a man like you.
What are you going to do with me? What's that thing you put in me?
Stand by... you're on.

This is Resistance Headquarters on Deald's World speaking to the Kyben fleet. We have placed a bomb on this planet. A sun-bomb. If it is detonated, the atmosphere will heat to the point where every living thing will perish, including all of us and all of you. Even if you were to leave now you wouldn't escape the effects of this device. If you wait, there is an alternative.
Taliant suddenly knew what Parkhurst meant; he knew where the bomb was hidden. He started to scream, but Shep's hand was over his mouth before the sound could escape.
The alternative is to let us go. We'll set the bomb on automatic and leave it for you to find. There is a way it can be deactivated. If you don't comply, we'll trigger it now. You have one hour to reply. Out.

Part of that might be a bluff: there may not be a way to damp the bomb.
Exactly sixty minutes later the translating machine broke the silence with a cold metallic voice, the product of changing Kyben to English.
We accept. You have seven hours to load and leave.
Let's get moving.
What about me? Tell ...


The Kyben have tracing devices; they'd locate the bomb in a moment if it were stationary. But it won't be. They'll think we're all gone but you'll be here carrying the bomb. You're our insurance policy.
What if I turn myself in and let them take it out like you put it in?
You won't. The first soldier who traces the bomb to you will pin you to the ground and slice you open. So the longer you keep running, the longer it takes to find you, and the better chance we have of warning Earth. In about seven hours you become real valuable. I know, you've got the life of the entire Kyben fleet in your

The launch field was silent at last. The noise of loading the remaining thousands of Dealders had crashed back and forth for hours, and now the last ship was ready.


I can't. If there were and you knew it you'd run to the Kyben now. But if you think it'll go off when they touch, you'll wait a long time.
Goodbye, Benno Tallant. I wish I could say God bless you.

He was alone
He felt the hunger rising once more. This time he could drown himself in dream dust and lie there in heaven till the bomb went off.

He returned to the bunker and found the trap door that led down to Headquarters. A half-hour of smashing into lockers and he found Doc Budder's supply of medical dream-dust.

He snorted a packet and felt himself getting stronger. Kyben? Yes, bring them on!

He stuffed his pockets full of white packets and strutted back out to the bunker.

Then Tallant saw his first Kyban.

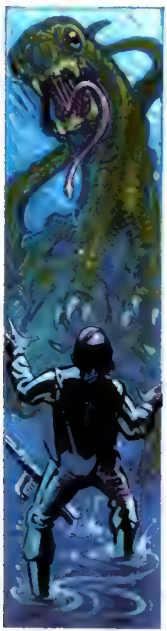
Abruptly, the resemblance to humans terrified him. Had they been grotesque he could hate them as monsters. But they were, if anything, more handsome than humans.

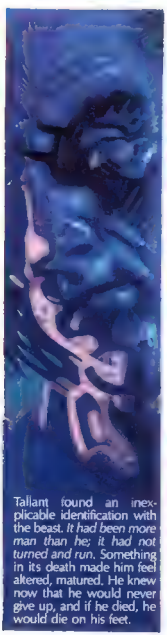
Suddenly Tallant realized that he was trapped. There was only one exit and the field was crawling with Kyben — furious enough at having been outfoxed to gut the first human they encountered.

But he found a new strength and he knew what to do.

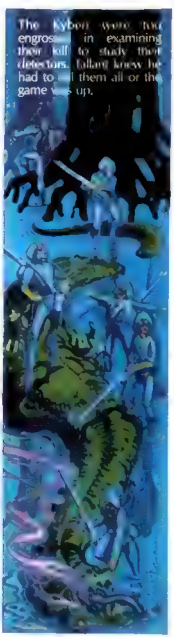
He dragged the body to the trap door, shoved it through and followed it down. He crouched there, the blastick ready to sear off the face of anyone who lifted the door
Overhead, he heard the sound of voices in the sibilant hiss of the Kyben tongue. He heard boots stomping around above him and thought he was caught — but a shout from outside called them away and they moved off.
While he waited to move he sniffed another packet of dust.
He was God again!

He made it as far as the Blue Marshes before another patrol found him. He'd been circling outward so that any ships tracking overhead could not pinpoint him. Eventually they would see that the target was not stationary and would recognize what the humans had done. He kept moving.





Tallant found an inexplicable identification with the beast. *It had been more man than he; it had not turned and run.* Something in its death made him feel altered, matured. He knew now that he would never give up, and if he died, he would die on his feet.



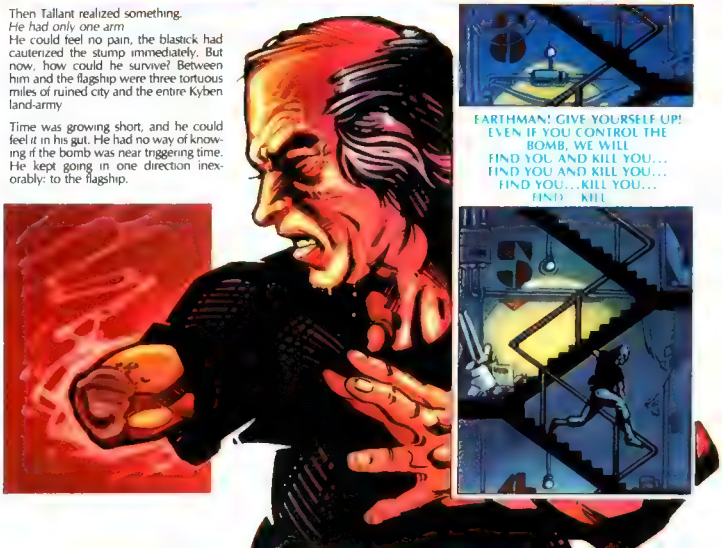
The Kybon were too engrossed in examining their kill to study their detectors. Tallant knew he had to kill them all or the game was up.

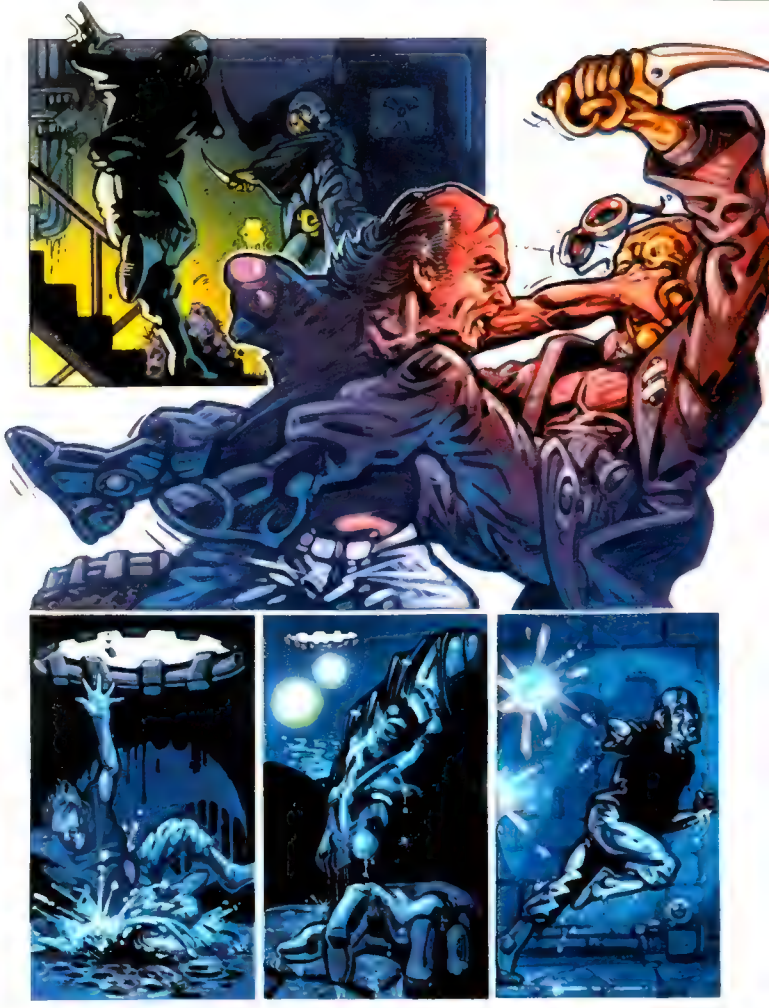
He stared down at the pulsing husks that had been alive a minute before. He thought of the dust, but felt no need for it now. The killer instinct was rising in the coward.

That night, on the outskirts of Xvil e, Tallant killed this thirtieth Kyban From the corpse he took a long knife with an inlaid tile handle. It worked wondrously well on four more
Kyben blood was yellow. He wasn't surprised
In the center of the city was the command ship of the Kyben fleet. He knew he had to get inside and find a surgeon
He was standing to go when the soldier stepped into the room and froze.
A human — here on conquered ground!

Then Tallant realized something.
*He had only one arm*
He could feel no pain, the blastick had cauterized the stump immediately. But now, how could he survive? Between him and the flagship were three tortuous miles of ruined city and the entire Kyben land-army

Time was growing short, and he could feel *it* in his gut. He had no way of knowing if the bomb was near triggering time. He kept going in one direction inexorably: to the flagship.


EARTHMAN! GIVE YOURSELF UP!
EVEN IF YOU CONTROL THE BOMB, WE WILL
FIND YOU AND KILL YOU...
FIND YOU AND KILL YOU...
FIND YOU...KILL YOU...
FIND...KILL



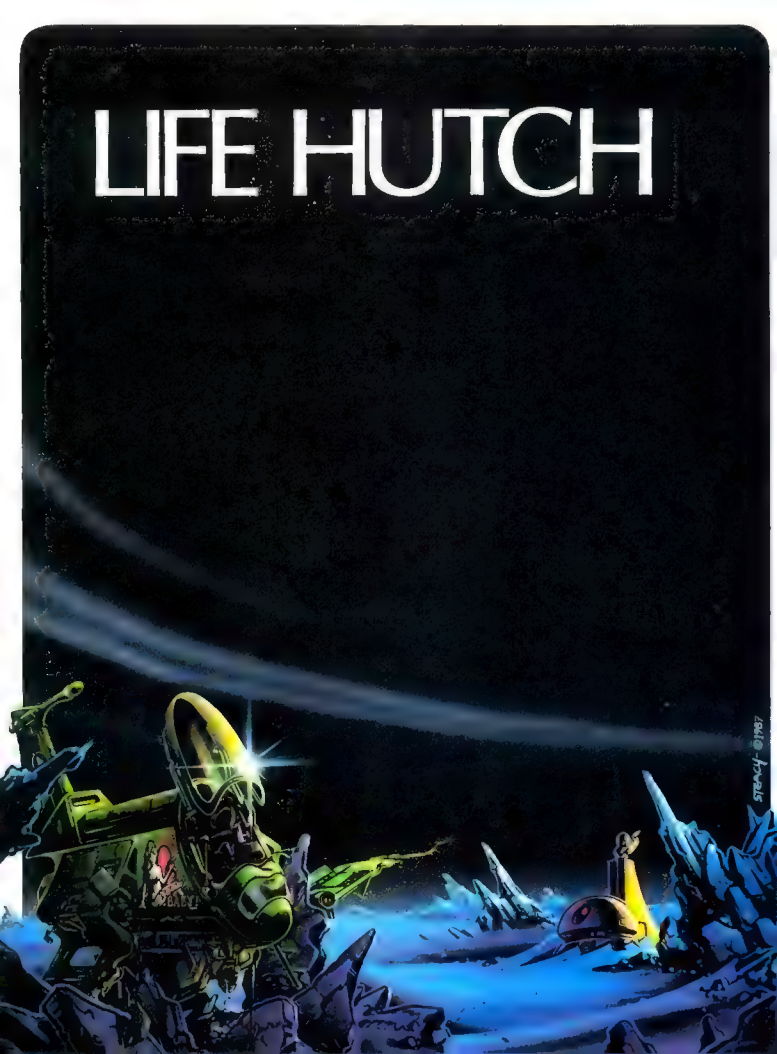
A short run from the sewer plug and he was hidden by the shadow of the monstrous spaceship. Unarmed, he knew the direct approach was the only way to get by the guard.
He began to sweat; if he had figured wrong, he was dead. But then he saw what he wanted — the Kyban was obviously a doctor.
English? You speak English? Good; now, you'll stay alive, Doc; but don't try anything cute. There's gotta be an operating room around here — you're gonna take me there and do a little surgery on me; and one move that looks wrong and I take off the top of your skull, understand? Great.
Now move it!
The interior of the ship was cool and moist and dark. Kyba was a cooler monster and darker planet. He saw no one. Every alien had been sent planetside to search for the homo and here it was walking through the mother ship.

Tallant refused even a local anesthetic. He propped up, a silver-shot revolver pointed directly at the medic. The Kyban stared at the cylinder of the gun, the little capsules in their chambers, thought of how they were fired through the altering mechanism to come out as
As the incision firmed up under the alien epidermizer, Tallant studied the bomb's mechanism. Then he motioned to the doctor
Now graft the bomb to my stump
It took ten minutes of pistol-whipping for Tallant to realize the medic would go only so far and no further. He would not do as he was ordered. At least, not under its own will.
It took some doing, but he got the full demolishing dose into the alien's nostrils.
When he awoke, he would do anything for another of the packets in Tallant's pocket. Tallant wanted one thing: the sun-bomb grafted to his arm where he could detonate it in an instant.

There was no pain
The bomb was set into the stump with a simple wire hookup that would detonate under several circumstances.
If Tallant consciously triggered the bomb
If anyone tried to remove it against his will.
If he died and his heart stopped.
The Kyben doctor had done his work well
Sure, Doc, you can have the snuff. But first take me up-decks to meet your Commandant.
This is the last man on Deakl's World speaking, my Kyben friends. I'm the man you've finally realized carries the sun-bomb. But now I control it. I can set it off at will and blow this planet to dust...and you with it!
The medic directed Tallant to the communications console and patched him through to the Kyben armada; to the men in the field, to the ships ranged across the field, to the skeleton crew of the ship in which he stood.

But you have no reason to fear me. I'm going to offer you a deal far superior to anything you had as mere soldiers. I offer you the chance to go anywhere you wish as warriors with worlds at your command.
Does it matter who leads this fleet? As long as you conquer galaxies, I don't think it does.
Our first destination...
EARTH!
He didn't hate anyone now. He was above that.
He turned away from the port and looked about at the ship that would mold his destiny, knowing he was free of Deald's World, free of the dust. He needed neither now.
Now he was God on his own.
Now he would get even.

# LIFE HUTCH



Terrence slid his right hand, the one out of sight of the robot, up his side. The razoring pain of the three broken ribs caused his eyes to widen momentarily in pain. Then he recovered himself and closed them till he was studying the machine through narrow slits.

*If the eyeballs click, I'm dead,* thought Terrence.

The intricate murmurings of the life hutch around him brought back the immediacy of his situation. His eyes again fastened on the medicine cabinet clamped to the wall next to the robot's duty-niche.

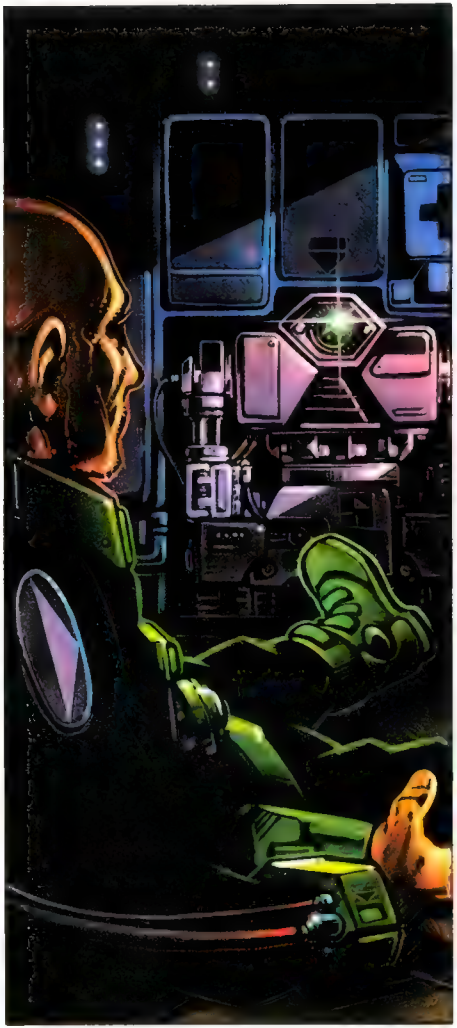
*Cliché. So near yet so far. It could be all the way back on Antares Base for all the good it's doing me,* he thought, and a crazy laugh rang through his head. He caught himself just in time. *Easy! Three days is a nightmare, but cracking up will only make it end sooner.* That was the last thing he wanted. But it couldn't go on much longer.

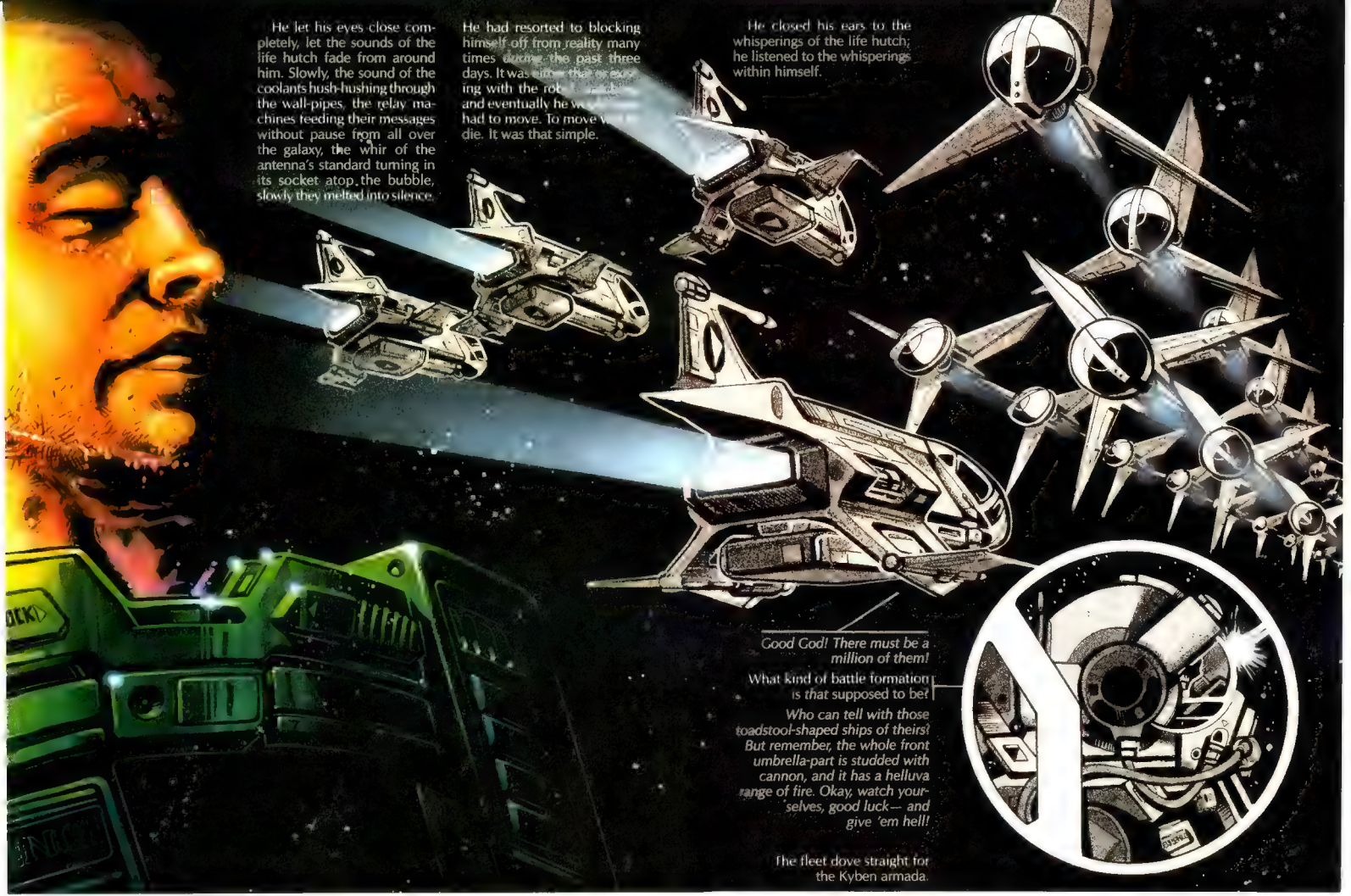
He flexed the fingers of his right hand. It was all he *could* move. Silently he damned the technician who had passed the robot through. Or the politician who had let interior robots get placed in the life hutches so he could get a rake-off from the government contract. Or the repairman who hadn't bothered checking closely his last time around. All of them; he damned them all.

They deserved it.

He was dying.

His death had started before he had reached the life hutch. Terrence had begun to die when he had gone into the battle.




He let his eyes close completely, let the sounds of the life hutch fade from around him. Slowly, the sound of the coolants hush-hushing through the wall-pipes, the relay machines feeding their messages without pause from all over the galaxy, the whir of the antenna's standard turning in its socket atop the bubble, slowly they melted into silence.
He had resorted to blocking himself off from reality many times during the past three days. It was [illegible] ing with the rob[illegible] and eventually he w[illegible] had to move. To move w[illegible] die. It was that simple.
He closed his ears to the whisperings of the life hutch; he listened to the whisperings within himself.
Good God! There must be a million of them!
What kind of battle formation is that supposed to be?
Who can tell with those toadstool-shaped ships of theirs? But remember, the whole front umbrella-part is studded with cannon, and it has a helluva range of fire. Okay, watch yourselves, good luck— and give 'em hell!
The fleet dove straight for the Kyben armada.

FIRE!


SAFE
TERRAN


ALERT!
ALERT!

To his mind came the sounds of war, across the gulf of space. It was all imagination; in that tomb there was no sound. Yet he could clearly detect the hiss of his scout's blaster as it poured beam after beam into the lead ship of the Kyben fleet.

His sniper-class scout had been near the point of that deadly Terran phalanx, driving like a wedge at the alien ships, converging on them in loose battle-formation. It was then it had happened.

One moment he had been heading into the middle of the battle, the left flank of the giant Kyben dreadnought turning crimson under the impact of his firepower.

The next moment, he had skittered out of the formation which had slowed to let the Kyben craft overshoot, while the Earthmen decelerated to pick up maneuverability.

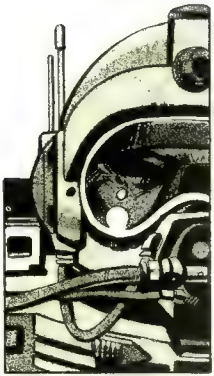
He had gone on at the old level and velocity, directly into the forward guns of a toadstool-shaped Kyben destroyer.

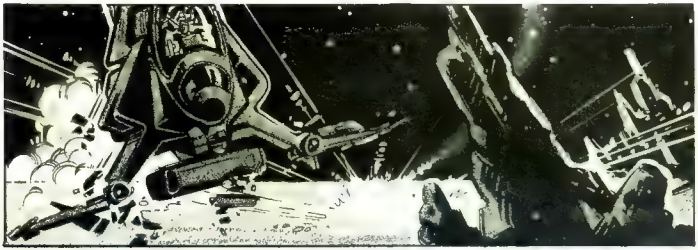
The first beam had burned the gun-mounts and directional equipment off the front of the ship, scorching down the aft side in a smear like oxidized chrome plate. He had managed to avoid the second beam.

His radio contact had been brief; he was going to make it back to Antares-Base if he could. If not, the formation would be listening to his homing-beam from a life hutch on whatever planetoid he might find for a crash-landing.

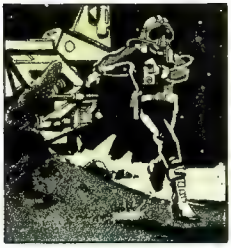
Which was what he had done. The charts had said the pebble spinning there was technically 1—333, 2—A, M & S, 3—804.39#, which would have meant nothing but three-dimensional coordinates had not the small # after the data indicated a life hutch somewhere on its surface.

His distaste at being knocked out of the fighting, being forced onto one of the life hutch planetoids, had been offset only by his fear of running out of fuel before he could locate himself. Of eventually drifting off into space somewhere, to finally wind up as an artificial satellite around some minor sun

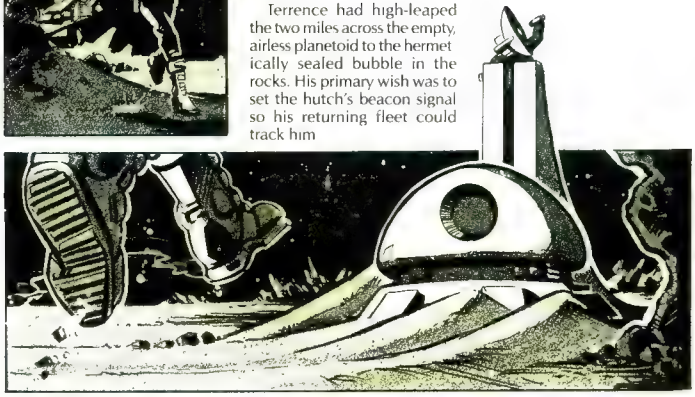




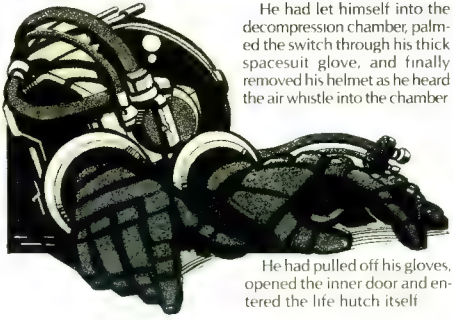
The ship pancaked in under minimal reverse drive, bounced high twice and caromed ten times, tearing out chunks of the rear section, but had come to rest a scant two miles from the life hutch, jammed into the rocks.



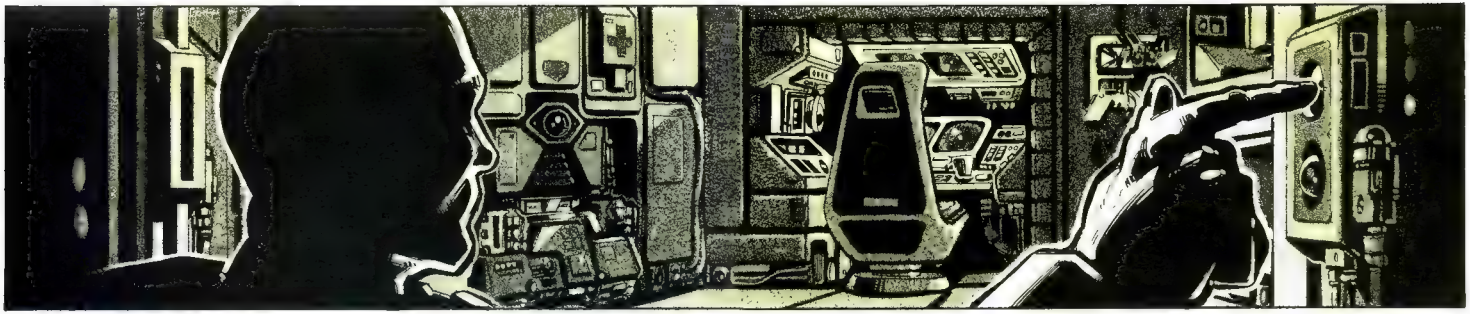
Terrence had high-leaped the two miles across the empty, airless planetoid to the hermetically sealed bubble in the rocks. His primary wish was to set the hutch's beacon signal so his returning fleet could track him



He had let himself into the decompression chamber, palmed the switch through his thick spacesuit glove, and finally removed his helmet as he heard the air whistle into the chamber



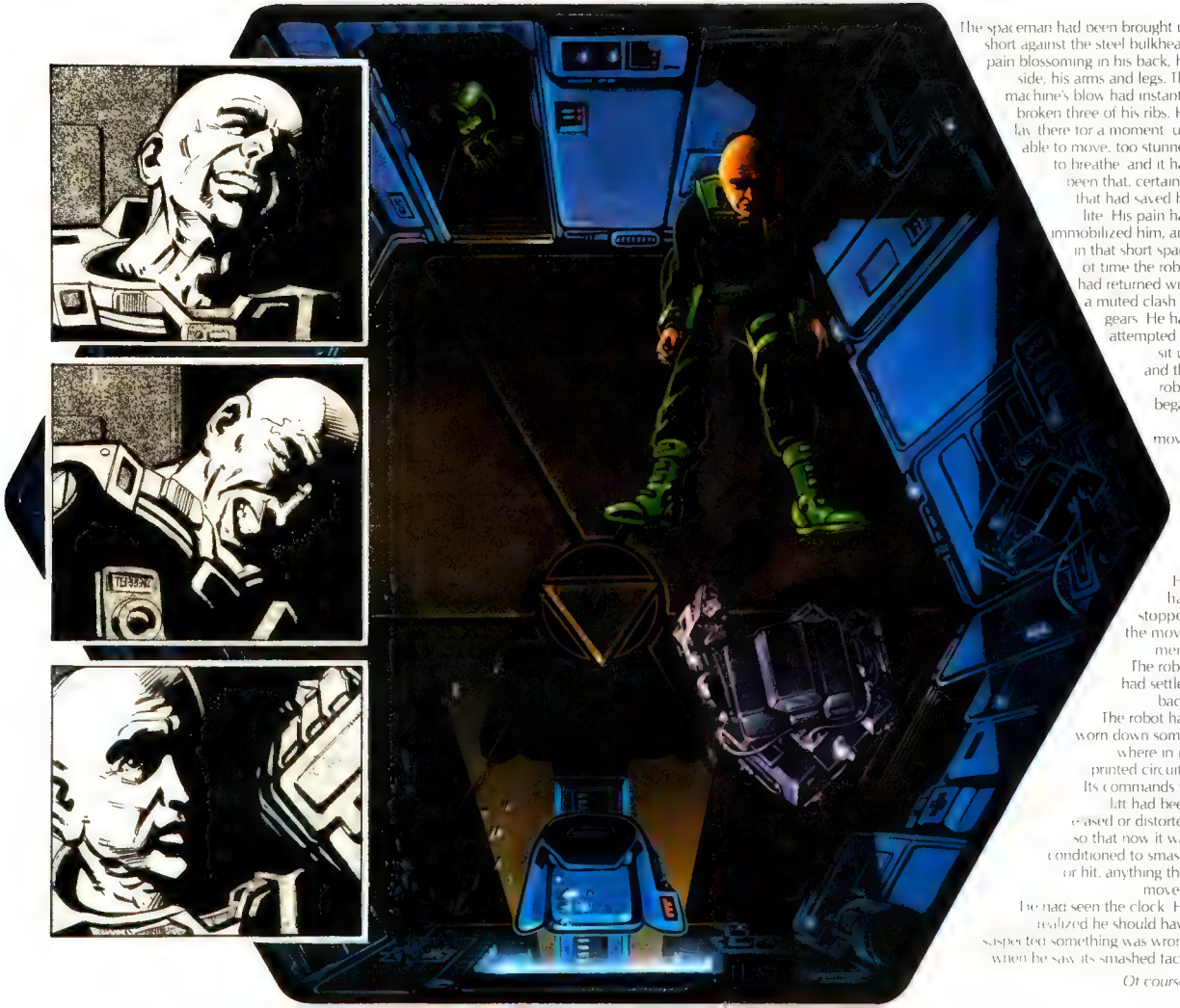
He had pulled off his gloves, opened the inner door and entered the life hutch itself



*God bless you, little life hutch,* Terrence had thought as he dropped the helmet and gloves. He had glanced around, noting the relay machines picking up messages from outside, sorting them, vectoring them off in other directions. He had seen the medicine chest clamped onto the wall, the refrigerator he knew would be well-stocked if a previous tenant hadn't been there before the stockman could refill it. He had seen the all purpose robot, immobile in its duty-niche. And the wall-chronometer, its face smashed. All of it in a second's glance.

*God bless, too, the gentlemen who thought up the idea of these little rescue stations, stuck all over the place for just such emergencies as this.* He had started to walk across the room.

It was at this point that the service robot, that kept the place in repair between tenants and unloaded supplies from the ships, had moved clankingly across the floor, and with one fearful smash of a steel arm thrown Terrence across the room.



The spaceman had been brought up short against the steel bulkhead, pain blossoming in his back, his side, his arms and legs. The machine's blow had instantly broken three of his ribs. He lay there for a moment unable to move, too stunned to breathe and it had been that, certainly, that had saved his life. His pain had immobilized him, and in that short space of time the robot had returned with a muted clash of gears. He had attempted to sit up and the robot began to move.

He had stopped the movement. The robot had settled back. The robot had worn down somewhere in its printed circuits. Its commands to life had been erased or distorted so that now it was conditioned to smash or hit, anything that moved. He had seen the clock. He realized he should have suspected something was wrong when he saw its smashed face.

*Of course!*

The digital dials had moved. The robot had smashed the clock. Terrence had moved. The robot had smashed him.

And would again, if he moved again.

But for the unnoticeable movement of his eyelids, he had not moved in three days.

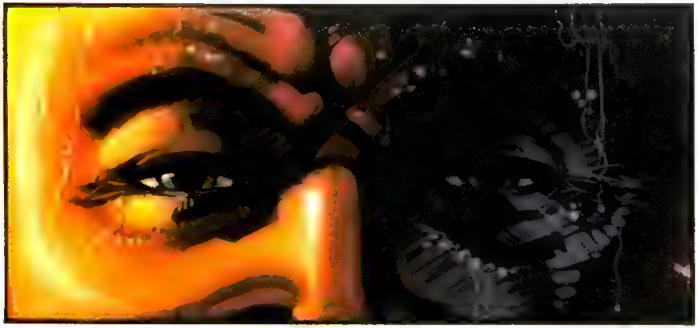
He had tried moving toward the decompression lock, stopping when the robot advanced and letting it settle back, then moving again, a little nearer. But the idea died with his first movement. His ribs were too painful. The pain was terrible. He was locked in one position, an uncomfortable, twisted position, and he would be there till the stalemate ended, one way or the other.

He was suddenly alert again. The reliving of his last three days brought back reality sharply.

He was twelve feet away from the communications panel, twelve feet away from the beacon that would guide his rescuers to him. Before he died of his wounds, before he starved to death, before the robot crushed him. It could have been twelve light-years, for all the nearer he could get to it.

What had gone wrong with the robot? Time to think was cheap. The robot could detect movement, but thinking was still possible. Not that it could help, but it was possible.

The companies that supplied the life hutch's needs were all government contracted. Somewhere along the line someone had thrown in impure steel or calibrated the circuit-cutting machines for a less expensive job. Somewhere along the line someone had not run the robot through its paces correctly. Somewhere along the line someone had committed murder.



He opened his eyes again Only the barest traction of opening. Any more and the robot would sense the movement of his eyelids That would be fatal

Three days had left him weak and dizzy from hunger His head was light and his eyes burned steadily He had been lying in his own filth till he no longer noticed the discomfort His side ached and throbbed, and the pain of a blast furnace roared through him every time he breathed

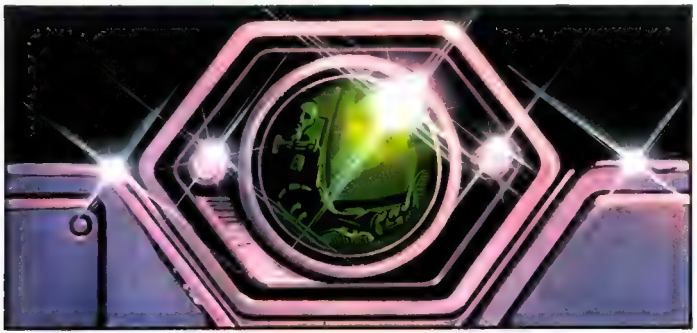
He thanked God his spacesuit was still on, lest the movement of his breathing bring the robot down on him. There was only one solution, and that solution was his death He was almost delirious

He looked at the machine

It was not, strictly speaking a robot It was merely a remote-controlled hunk of jointed steel, invaluable for making beds, stacking steel plating, washing culture dishes, unloading spaceships and sucking dirt from rugs The robot body, roughly humanoid, but without what would have been a head on a human, was merely an appendage

The real brain, a complex maze of plastic screens and printed circuits, was behind the wall. It would have been too dangerous to install those delicate parts in a heavy-duty mechanism. It was too easy for the robot to drop itself from a loading shaft, or be hit by a meteorite, or get caught under a wrecked spaceship So there were sensitive units in the robot appendage that "saw" and "heard" what was going on, and relayed them to the brain behind the wall

And somewhere along the line that brain had worn grooves too deeply into its circuits. It was now mad. Not mad in any way a human being



might go mad, for there were an infinite number of ways a machine could go insane. Just mad enough to kill Terrence.

*Even if I could hit the robot with something, it wouldn't stop the thing.* He could perhaps throw something at the machine before it could get to him, but it would do no good. The robot brain would still be intact, and the appendage would continue to function. It was hopeless.

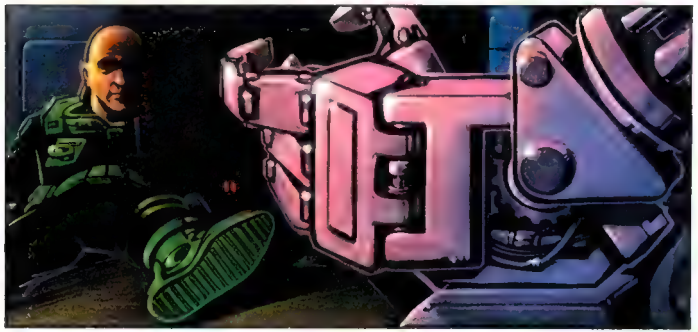
He stared at the massive, blocky hands of the robot. It seemed he could see his own blood on the jointed work-tool fingers of one hand. He knew it must be his imagination, but the idea persisted. He flexed the fingers of his hidden hand.

Several times during the past day—as well as he could gauge night and day without a clock or a sunrise—he had heard the roar of the fleet landing outside. Then he had realized there was no sound in dead space. Then he had realized they were all inside the relay machines, coming through subspace right into the life hutch. Then he had realized that such a thing was not possible. Then he came to his senses and realized all that had gone before was hallucination.

Then he had awakened and known it was real. He was trapped, and there was no way out. Death had come to live with him. He was going to die.

Terrence had never been a coward, nor had he been a hero. He was one of the men who fight wars because they are always fought by someone. He was the kind of man who would allow himself to be torn from wife and home and flung into an abyss they called Space to defend what he had been told needed defense. But it was in moments like this that a man like Terrence began to think.

*Why here? Why like this?*



*What have I done that I should finish in a filthy spacesuit on a lost rock and not gloriously, like they said in the papers back home, but starving or bleeding to death alone with a crazy robot? Why me? Why me? Why alone?*

He knew there could be no answers. He expected no answers.

He was not disappointed.

He awoke. He instinctively looked at the chronometer. Its shattered face looked back at him, forcing his eyes open in utter sleep terror. The robot hummed and emitted a spark.

He kept his eyes open. The humming ceased. His eyes began to burn. He knew he couldn't keep them open too long.

The burning worked its way to the front of his eyes, from the top and bottom, bringing with it tears. It felt as though someone was shoving needles into the corners. The tears ran down over his cheeks.

His eyes snapped shut. The roaring grew in his ears. The robot didn't make a sound.

*Could it be inoperative? Could it have worn down to*

*immobility?* Could he take the chance of experimenting?

He slid down to a more comfortable position. The robot charged forward the instant he moved. He froze in mid movement, his heart a chunk of ice. The robot stopped, confused, a scant ten inches from his outstretched foot. The machine hummed to itself, the noise of it coming both from the machine before him and from somewhere behind the wall.

He was suddenly alert. If it had been working correctly, there would have been

little or no sound from the appendage, and none whatsoever from the brain. But it was *not* working properly, and the sound of its thinking was distinct.

The robot rolled backward, its "eyes" still toward Terrence. The sense orbs of the machine were in the torso, giving the machine the look of a squat metal gargoyle, squared and deadly.

The humming was growing louder, every now and then a sharp *pttttt!* of sparks mixed with it. Terrence had a moment's horror at the thought

of a short-circuit, a fire in the kitchen hutch, and no service robot to put it out.

He listened carefully to pinpoint the location of the robot's brain built into the wall.

Then he thought he had it. Or was it there? It was either in the wall behind a bulkhead next to the refrigerator, or behind a bulkhead near the relay machines. The two possible housings were within a few feet of each other, but they might make a great deal of difference.

The distortion created by the steel plate in front of the brain

and the distracting background noise of the robot broadcasting it made it difficult to tell exactly which was the correct location.

He drew a deep breath.

The ribs slid a fraction of an inch together, their broken ends grinding.

He moaned.

A high-pitched tortured moan that died quickly, but throbbed back and forth inside his head, echoing and building itself into a paean of sheer agony! It forced his tongue out of his mouth, limp in a corner

of his lips, moving slightly. The robot rolled forward. He drew his tongue in, clamped his mouth shut, cut off the scream inside his head at its high point.

The robot stopped, rolled back to its duty-niche.

*Oh God! The pain! The God God where are you pain!*

Beads of sweat broke out on his body. He could feel them tickle inside his spacesuit, inside his jumper, inside the body shirt, on his skin. The pain of the ribs was suddenly heightened by an irresistible itching of his skin.

He moved infinitesimally within the suit, his outer appearance giving no indication of the movement. The itching did not subside. The more he tried to make it stop, the more he thought about not thinking about it, the worse it became. His armpits, the crooks of his arms, his thighs where the tight service-pants clung—suddenly too tightly—were madness. He had to scratch!

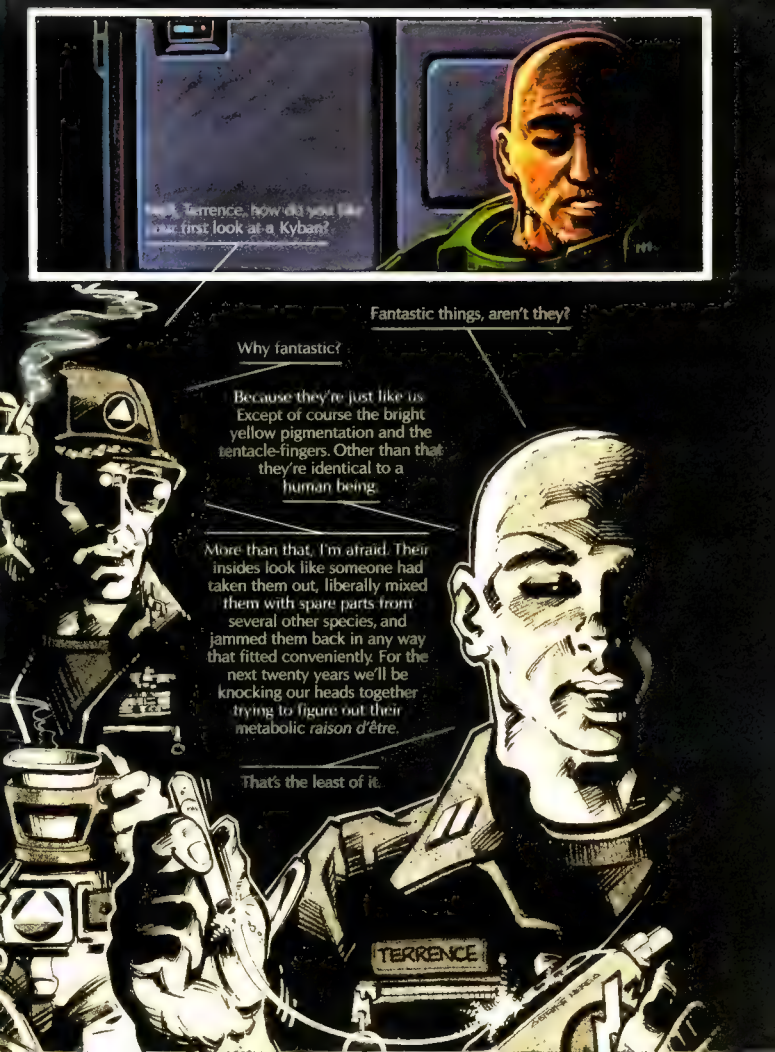
He almost started to make the movement. He stopped before he started. A laugh bubbled into his head. *God Al*

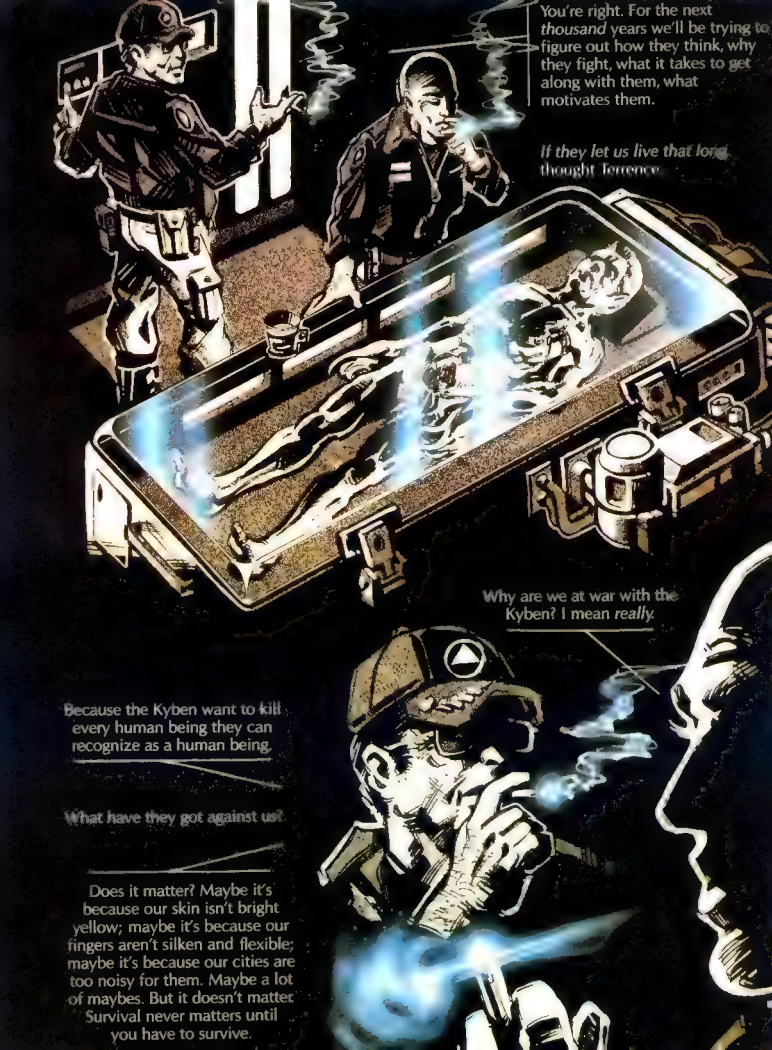
*mighty, and I always laughed at the slobs who suffered with the seven year itch, the ones who always did a little dance when they were at attention during inspection, the ones who could scratch and sigh contentedly. God, how I envy them.* His thoughts were taking on a wild sound, even to him.

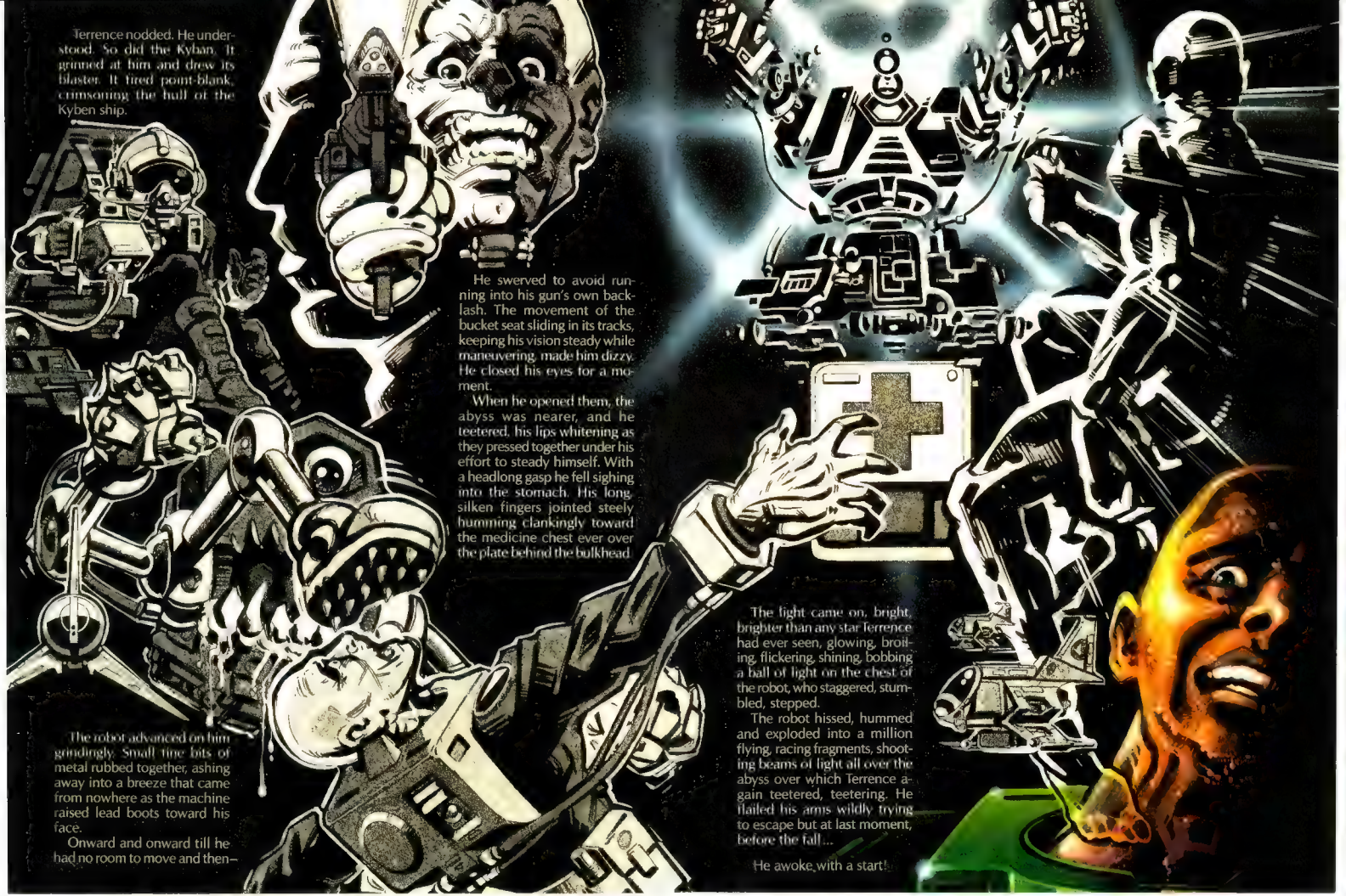
The prickling did not stop. He twisted faintly. It got worse. He took another deep breath.

The ribs sandpapered again.

This time, blessedly, he fainted from the pain.


Terrence, how did you like our first look at a Kyban?
Fantastic things, aren't they?
Why fantastic?
Because they're just like us. Except of course the bright yellow pigmentation and the tentacle-fingers. Other than that they're identical to a human being.
More than that, I'm afraid. Their insides look like someone had taken them out, liberally mixed them with spare parts from several other species, and jammed them back in any way that fitted conveniently. For the next twenty years we'll be knocking our heads together trying to figure out their metabolic *raison d'être*.
That's the least of it.
TERRENCE


You're right. For the next *thousand* years we'll be trying to figure out how they think, why they fight, what it takes to get along with them, what motivates them.
*If they let us live that long,* thought Terrence.
Why are we at war with the Kyben? I mean *really.*
Because the Kyben want to kill every human being they can recognize as a human being.
What have they got against us?
Does it matter? Maybe it's because our skin isn't bright yellow; maybe it's because our fingers aren't silken and flexible; maybe it's because our cities are too noisy for them. Maybe a lot of maybes. But it doesn't matter. Survival never matters until you have to survive.


Terrence nodded. He understood. So did the Kyban. It grinned at him and drew its blaster. It fired point-blank, crimsoning the hull of the Kyben ship.
He swerved to avoid running into his gun's own backlash. The movement of the bucket seat sliding in its tracks, keeping his vision steady while maneuvering, made him dizzy. He closed his eyes for a moment.
When he opened them, the abyss was nearer, and he teetered, his lips whitening as they pressed together under his effort to steady himself. With a headlong gasp he fell sighing into the stomach. His long, silken fingers jointed steely humming clankingly toward the medicine chest ever over the plate behind the bulkhead.
The robot advanced on him grindingly. Small fine bits of metal rubbed together, ashing away into a breeze that came from nowhere as the machine raised lead boots toward his face.
Onward and onward till he had no room to move and then–
The light came on, bright, brighter than any star Terrence had ever seen, glowing, broiling, flickering, shining, bobbing a ball of light on the chest of the robot, who staggered, stumbled, stepped.
The robot hissed, hummed and exploded into a million flying, racing fragments, shooting beams of light all over the abyss over which Terrence again teetered, teetering. He flailed his arms wildly trying to escape but at last moment, before the fall...
He awoke with a start!

He saved himself only by his unconscious. Even in the hell of a nightmare he was aware of the situation. He had not moaned and writhed in his delirium. He had kept motionless and silent.

He knew it was true, because he was still alive.

Only his surprised jerking, as he came back to consciousness, started the monster rolling from its niche. He came fully awake and sat silent, slumped against the wall. The robot retreated.

Thin breath came through his nostrils. Another moment and he would have put an end to the past three days—three days or more now? how long had he been asleep?—days of torture.

He was hungry. Lord how hungry he was. The pain in his side was worse now, a steady throbbing that made even shallow breathing tortuous. He itched maddeningly. He was uncomfortably slouched against a cold steel bulkhead, every rivet having made a burrow for itself in his skin. He wished he was dead.

He didn't wish he was dead. It was all too easy to get his wish.

If he could only disable that robot brain. A total impossibility. If he could only wear Phobos and Deimos for watchfobs. If he could only shack up with a silicon-deb from Penares. If he could only use his large colon for a lasso.

It would take a thorough destruction of the brain to do it enough damage to stop the appendage before it could roll over and smash Terrence again.

With a steel bulkhead between him and the brain, his chances of success totaled minus zero every time.

He considered which part of his body the robot would smash first. One blow of that tool hand would kill him if it was used a second time. With the state of his present wounds even a strong breath might finish him.

Perhaps he could make a break and get through the lock into the decompression chamber.

Worthless. (A) The robot would catch him before he had gotten to his feet, in his present condition. (B) Even allowing a miracle, even if he did get through the lock, the robot would smash the lock apart, letting in air, ruining the mechanism. (C) Even allowing a double miracle and it didn't what the hell good would it do him? His helmet and gloves were in the hutch itself, and there was no place to go on the planetoid. The ship was ruined, so no signal could be sent from there.

Doom suddenly compounded itself.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that soon the light would flicker out for him.

The light would flicker out.
The light would flicker.
The light
light.. ?

*Oh God, is it possible? Can it be? Have I found an answer?* He marveled at the simplicity of it. It had been there for more than three days waiting for him to use it. It was so simple it was magnificent. He could hardly restrain himself from moving, just out of sheer joy.

*I'm not brilliant, I'm not a genius, why did this occur to me?* For a few minutes the brilliance of the solution staggered him. Would a less intelligent man have solved the problem this easily? Would a *more* intelligent man have done it? Then he remembered the dream. The light in the dream. *He* hadn't solved the problem, his unconscious had. The answer had been there all the time, but he was too close to see it. His mind had been forced to devise a way to tell him. Luckily, it had.

And finally, he didn't care *how* he had uncovered it. His God, if he had had anything to do with it, had heard him. Terrence was by no means a religious man, but this was miracle enough to make him a believer. It wasn't over yet, but the answer was there—and it was an answer.

He began to save himself.

Slowly, achingly slowly, he moved his right hand, the hand away from the robot's sight, to his belt. On the belt hung the assorted implements a spaceman needs at any moment in his ship. A wrench. A packet of sleep-stavers. A compass. A geiger counter. A flashlight.

The last was the miracle. Miracle in a tube.

He fingered it almost reverently, then unclipped it in a moment's frenzy, still immobile to the robot's "eyes."

He held it at his side, away from his body by a fraction of an inch, pointing up over the bulge of his spacesuited leg.

If the robot looked at him all it would see would be the motionless bulk of his leg blocking off any movement on his part. To the machine, he was inert. Motionless.

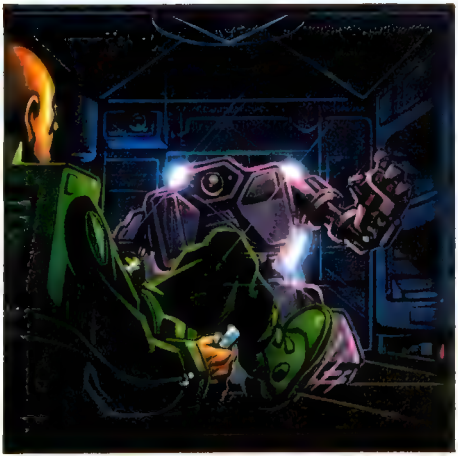
Now, he thought wildly, *where is the brain?*

If it is behind the relay machines I'm still dead. If it is near the refrigerator, I'm saved. He could afford to take no chances. He would have to move.

He lifted one leg.

The robot moved toward him. The humming and sparking were more distinct this time. He dropped the leg.

Behind the plates above the refrigerator!



The robot stopped, nearly at his side. Seconds had decided. The robot hummed, sparked, and returned to its niche.

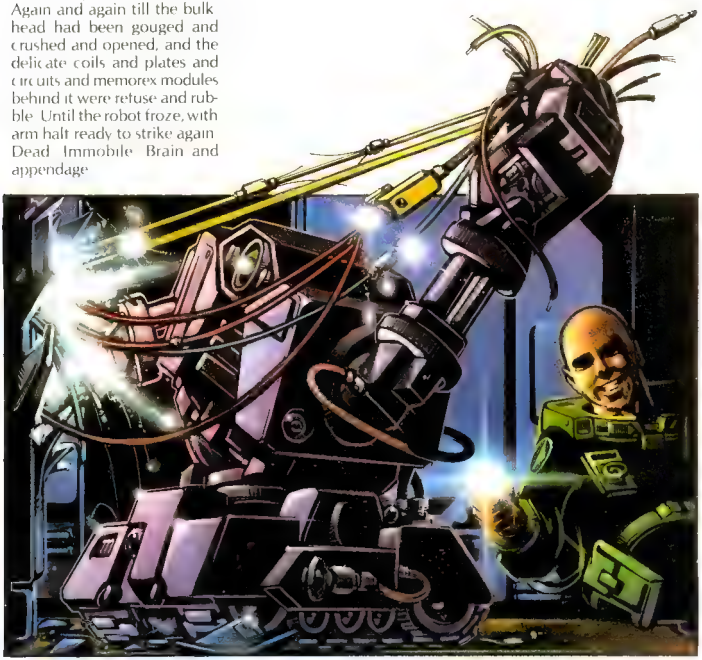
Now he knew!

He pressed the button. The invisible beam of the flashlight leaped out, speared the bulkhead above the refrigerator. He pressed the button again and again: the last circle of light appearing, disappearing, appearing, disappearing on the faceless metal of the kitchen's wall.

The robot sparked and rolled from its niche. It looked once at reference. Its rollers changed direction in an instant and the machine ground toward the refrigerator.

The steeled fist swung in a vicious arc, smashing with a deafening clang! at the spot where the light bubble flickered on and off.

It swung again and again Again and again till the bulk head had been gouged and crushed and opened, and the delicate coils and plates and circuits and memorex modules behind it were refuse and rubble Until the robot froze, with arm half ready to strike again Dead Immobile Brain and appendage



Even then Terrence did not stop pressing the flashlight button Wildly he thumbed it again and again and again

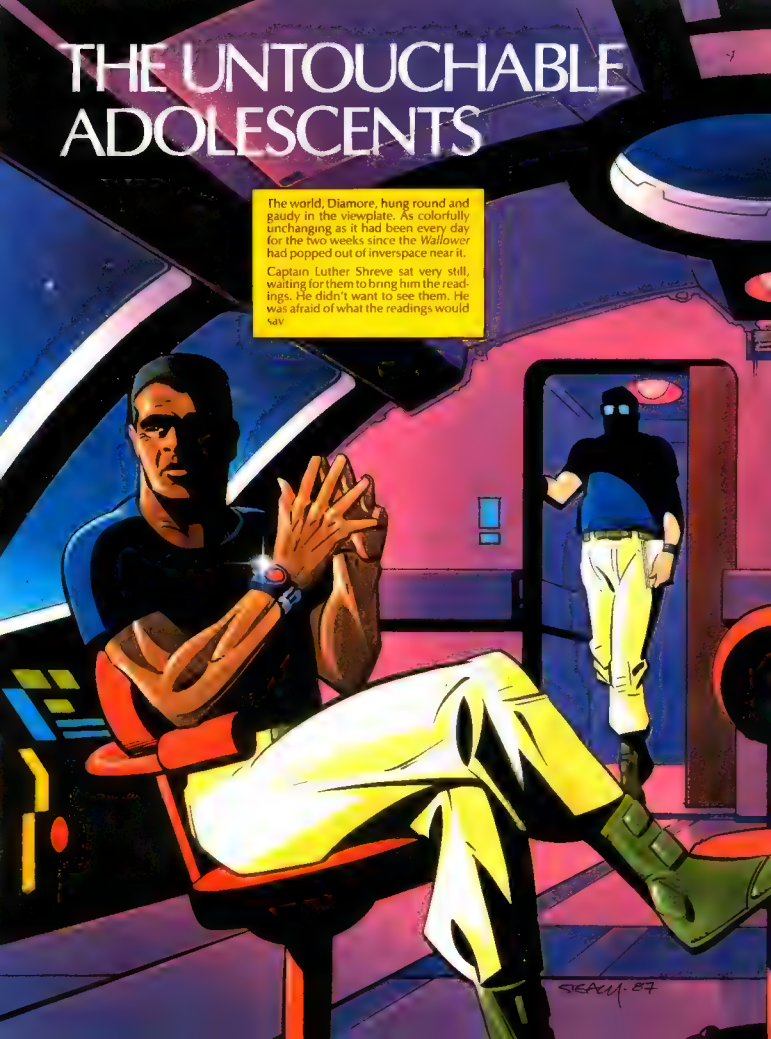
Then he realized it was all over.

The robot was dead. He was alive. He would be saved. He had no doubts about that Now he could cry

The medicine chest grew large through the shimmering in his eyes

*God bless you, little life hutch,* he thought, before he fainted

# THE UNTOUCHABLE ADOLESCENTS

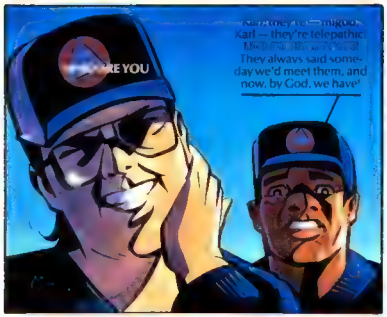

The world, Diamore, hung round and gaudy in the viewplate. As colorfully unchanging as it had been every day for the two weeks since the *Wallower* had popped out of inverspace near it.
Captain Luther Shreve sat very still, waiting for them to bring him the readings. He didn't want to see them. He was afraid of what the readings would sav
STEACY-87

Any room for error, Karl?
They tell me no, Luther. They have less than five months. The eruptions will wipe out nine-tenths of the centers of community.
We've got to do something! It's more than just business potential ruined. There are people down there Karl! Millions of them. We can't let them die!
True. But what about the itinerary? They'll scream bloody blazes back there if you break schedule.
This is more important than tails of lading and sales curves! We've got to help those people down there. We've got to save them!
All right, Luther. It's your decision.

An hour later the great *Wallower* turned away with directional thrusters, and began to fall toward the multicolored sphere of Diamore.

The analyzers were just completing their spore-counts when the Diamorali burst from the jungle and thundered onto the charred ground of the clearing
A young people. Sounds to me we're in trouble getting through to them.

They moved slowly toward the Diamo rai, hands raised in friendship. All around them the screams of the jungle meshed into one primal roar.
Shreve felt the nerves in his teeth begin to twitch. He had been about to say something soothing in English, but the words never came out.


Karl — they're telepathic! Unbelievable! They always said someday we'd meet them, and now, by God, we have!

help you, friends.

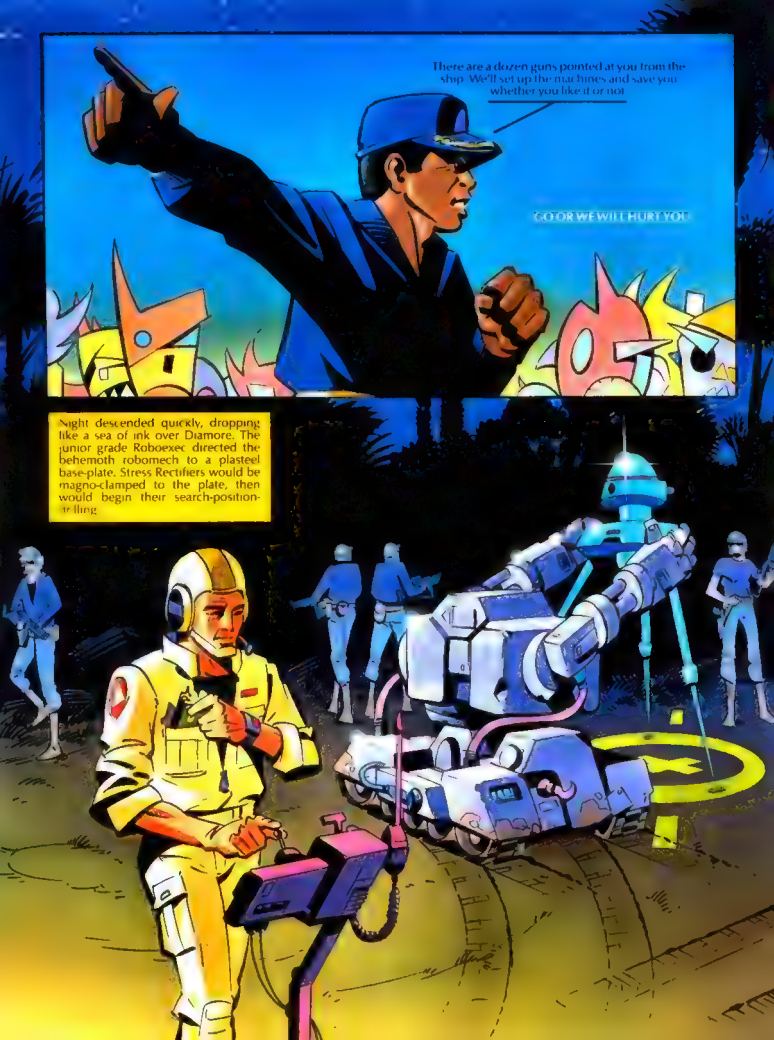
HEAR THIS, YOU ARE NOT THE FIRST STRANGERS TO COME HERE. ONCE BEFORE MEN CAME TO US FROM THE SKY. THEY CALLED THEMSELVES KYBEN AND TOLD US THEY WANTED TO TRADE. BUT THEY DID NOT TRADE. THEY ATE AWAY OUR LAND AND BURNED OUR JUNGLE AND TOOK OUR WOMEN AND KILLED OUR WARRIORS.

But you can read our minds — you can see we're telling the truth!
WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU CANNOT LIE WITH TELEPATHY GO
Look, you don't seem to understand. There are internal stresses in your planet that are going to rip open the continents. We can set up machines that will redirect these eruptions — into the ocean — so your people won't die. We
DID YOU SEE THE BLOOD PITS NEAR THE GREAT OCEAN THOSE WERE OUR CITIES WE RESISTED THE KYBEN THEY WANTED TO DRILL OUT OUR CEREMONIAL GROUNDS WE WOULD NOT LET THEM DRILL AND THEY SENT DOWN DEATH TO OUR CITIES

But you need our help!
You've got to believe me!
You can read my thoughts — can't you see
I'm telling the truth!!

All right, damn you! If you're too stupid to realize you need help, we'll help you despite yourselves!

WHY DO YOU THINK THE KYBEN LIE
MORE WE ARE NOT DEFENSELESS WE CAN
STOP YOU ME WILL HURT YOU GO


There are a dozen guns pointed at you from the ship. We'll set up the machines and save you whether you like it or not
GO OR WE WILL HURT YOU
Night descended quickly, dropping like a sea of ink over Diamore. The junior grade Roboexec directed the behemoth robomech to a plasteel base-plate. Stress Rectifiers would be magno-clamped to the plate, then would begin their search-position-drilling

His brains were fused. The autopsymen swore they'd never seen anything like it before. It was as if someone had taken that boy's brains in his red-hot hands and molded them like clay.
We are going to get those Rectifiers set up

After the sixth death — all of them with their brain-pans charred and their gray matter fused — Shreve broke down
Why? We came to help them, why won't they let us?
Luther, don't you see? They're adolescents. They don't know when to call for help. They've been hurt, and with the single-minded purpose of the immature they're bound not to let it happen again. You can't blame yourself for what's happened.

I've got to talk to them once more. To beg them again.

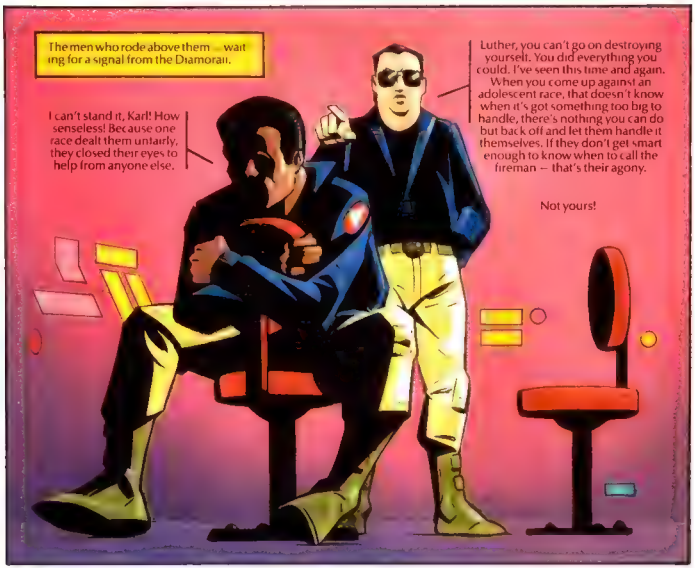
WE WARNED YOU THE GROUP-MIND IS INFINITELY STRONGER THAN OUR INDIVIDUAL POWER. NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN OUR STRENGTH WILL YOU GO?
We only want to help you. Won't you let us redirect the coming eruptions? Please!

We will hang above your atmosphere till you call us.

The Diamoran had won again!

Luther Shreve sat staring with almost hypnotized attention through the viewplate. Below him Diamore blasted and erupted and screamed and tore itself apart. He watched silently, every once in a while letting the thought *They didn't know when to ask for help* filter through his mind

The Deciders huddled in the blasted Council Hall. Within an hour of the first eruption almost three-fifths of their race had been slaughtered
WRONG WE WERE WRONG WE HAVE BEEN FOOLISH WE HAVE REJECTED OUR ONLY SALVATION WE MUST PREPARE THE GROUP-MIND TO SEND OUR PLEA FOR AID INTO SPACE SPEAK TO THE OUTSIDERS ASK THEM TO HELP US
They thought the instructions to their kin across Diamore's blasted face, and with the feel of agony radiating through the group-mind, the message weakly rose.
The power was, perhaps, insufficient to reach the spaceship.
The group-mind struggled, frantically beaming, in hopelessness trying to get through to the Earthmen who rode above.


The men who rode above them ... waiting for a signal from the Diamorah.
I can't stand it, Karl! How senseless! Because one race dealt them unfairly, they closed their eyes to help from anyone else.
Luther, you can't go on destroying yourself. You did everything you could. I've seen this time and again. When you come up against an adolescent race, that doesn't know when it's got something too big to handle, there's nothing you can do but back off and let them handle it themselves. If they don't get smart enough to know when to call the fireman — that's their agony.
Not yours!

For a moment he stared in wonder. Then he quietly left the control room.
He had never thought he'd see the day when Luther Shreve cried like a child.

# TROJAN HEARSE

The Avatar flickered, wavered, and disappeared. A smell of ozone filled the War Chamber.

There was a momentary silence, then the plasteel-armored guards fired at the spot. Angry bursts of flame erupted from their rifles and a section of the wall blistered and imploded. Shards of plasteel wall material showered the assembled War Council.

Imbecile! The sharp voice of Lord Fiagore froze the guards in mid movement. He's gone you fools! A Personal Orifice. He was gone the moment he touched the button! Out, get out!

The guards paled, in a moment they were gone, and the triple-locked door to the War Chamber was sealed. Then Fiagore turned on his Council. Hatred and a vague desperation clouded his eyes. His voice rang like an anvil. An agent! Right here in my Council! An agent of Earth!" Lord Fiagore's cheeks blew into a red turkey beat at the padded arms of his chair. Who is responsible? Who is the man who erected that — that agent?

Setaspear pushed back his chair at the Lord's right elbow and stood wearing an almost dedicated air. Your Mightiness," he said bowing his head and touching his forehead with two fingers, it was I who believed the man's story and references. I am the one who put him on the research team for this operation. If punishment is to be meted out — I am the responsible party.

Fiagore carefully steepled his thin fingers and looked across with dark brooding eyes.

If it were not you, Setaspear — he left the sentence hanging. But everyone there knew the bonds of friendship that bound the two Kybern bonds that stretched back through many years and many campaigns. Such ties were not easily broken.

Even in such an alarming situation as this.

Lord Fiagore sank back in his chair. His face mottled by deep pools of shadow, was unreadable, but his voice betrayed his emotion. What does this do to the situation? Is it as bad as I think? He looked quickly toward Setaspear.

The other licked dry lips and leaned forward. I don't think so, Your Mightiness. I merely means we can't take them entirely by surprise.

Fiagore was silent as he compared what his War Minister had said with the data he already possessed.

The armada was ready, lined rank on formidable rank before the Orifice. Death in seventy thousand shapes crouched on plasteel treads, waiting for the order that would launch them through the gigantic hoop, into inverspace, materializing them instantly on Earth, far across the galaxy.

Did he have the complete set of diagrams and specifications?" Lord Fiagore inquired. His voice had steadied.

A dark fat Kyban near the far end of the long Council table stood. "Yes, Your Omnipotence. He was with the research team bringing them here. He waited till the Supervisor had removed them from the field-proof case, activated his personal Orifice and took them to wherever the cursed Earthmen had instructed him.

Setaspear touched the War Baron's arm. I do not believe this will hamper us in the slightest, Your Greatness. What if the Terrans *do* have the specifications for the Orifice? Even though we have known the principle for many years now, it was only recently that our research teams perfected a fully-stable Orifice. It took our engineers three years to design and construct the large one. How can the miserable Earthmen hope to find a defense against it in a mere five weeks?

There is no way they can counter it! The Orifice! You're certain?

Certain, Your Greatness? Of course I'm certain! Our armada has been ready and waiting for six months. The Orifice activated, our fleets will roll into it — disappear here — and suddenly appear on Earth, behind any defenses they might set up, cannons firing, destroying as they come —"

He steepled his fingers once more, speaking quietly. "Interstellar war has never been feasible. Distances were too great. But now — with the Orifice, using inverspace and the field — we can become the mightiest race in the universe! Nothing can stand before us! Let the Earthmen be the first to know this. Steal our plans? Let them! In five weeks, we strike!

For the Mother World and the Lord!"

The assembled Council members leaped to their feet. Their voices shattered against the walls of the War Chamber.

*For the Mother World and our Lord!*

O DAY came, and the impulse sped from Research Center to the plain where the Orifice stood — a towering, glistening metal hoop, poised on its thin edge, like a portal. Suddenly the power poured into it, activating the field. The center of the hoop grew misty, glowed with a faint pink luminescence.

Commanders tossed sharp glances at their ring-com units, waiting the signal.

When it came, the blast and roar of machines springing to life rolled against the far mountains, smashing toward the sky with a fury of impatience. Dust rolled up in huge clouds as the war-tanks bit deep into the ground; their treads grinding it fine as they would grind fine the soil of planet Earth.

The lead tanks of the fleet positioned themselves carefully. Their Commanders directing from transparent plasteel conning bubbles, faces bright with sweat, eyes gleaming with the inner fire of conquest! The fire of destruction!

In the first tank Lord Fiagore nodded to his driver, and the armada plunged into inverspace.

*They hadn't needed three years. They hadn't even needed the full five weeks. When the agent plucked into existence in the high command offices, he turned over the plans, and his personal Orifice, and the work was completed in days.*

*There was only one way that the invaders. It had been stupid of them not to have overlooked it. It was almost too late.*

*But they had done that, oh, a long time ago, and now it was set.*

*The most valuable tool a tornado or the agent had learned, perhaps, was the location of the exit spatial fault where the giant Orifice would expel its deadly horde.*

*Once they had that, there was no need even to arm the troops.*

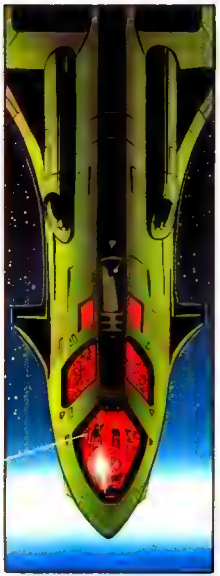
Fiagore's tank plunged into the misty wavering pinkness, and everything flashed into negative. Black was white, white was black, and the War Baron knew matter transmission was sending them through inverspace.

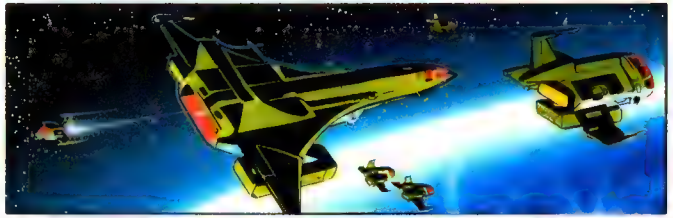
Then everything snapped back into focus, and Fiagore saw sunlight again in the split-instant before the back end of the tank left the invader's Orifice — and the front end met the defender's Orifice set directly in the path of exit so close there was no way to stop, no way to turn back. Now a to go but ahead.

And ahead the great Orifice had been set to exit on the desolate black of deep space.

SLEEPING
DOGS

The satisfaction on your face tells me you don't approve, Friend Ferraro.
A lot of good my disapproval does, Commander.
Well, you have the satisfaction of knowing your report will more than likely terminate my career.
And I'll bet that's good for that does the people down there!





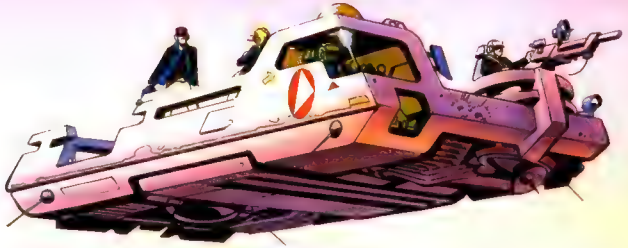
She was an *Amicus Hostis*, a Friend of the Enemy, placed on board the Terran dreadnought *Descartes* in this, the forty-first year of the Earth-Kyba War, to attempt *any kind* of rapprochement with the Kyben, should a situation present itself in which they would do other than kill or be killed. And when it became clear that this lunatic, this butcher, this Commander Julian Drabix was determined to take the planet at any cost ... when it became clear her command powers would be ignored by him, she had filed a report with Terran Central. But it would take time to be studied, time for a report – judgement, time for instructions to be fired back to the *Descartes*. Drabix had not waited. Contravening the authority of the *Amicus*, he had unleashed the full firepower of the dreadnought. Globar and Schall burned like Sodom & Gomorrah.

But unlike those hellholes of an ancient religion, no one knew if the residents of Globar and Schall were good, or evil, or merely frightened natives of a world caught in the middle of an interstellar war that seemed destined *never* to end.

She despised him. She despised everything about him, but this blind servitude to Cause was the most loathsome aspect of his character. Who would speak the elegy for the thousands, perhaps millions, who now burned among the stones of the twin cities?

When the conflagration died, and the rubble cooled, Commander Drabix and Friend Ferraro went to the surface. To murmur among the ashes.

Command post had been set up on the island the natives called Stand of Light. Drabix had ordered his recon teams to scour the planet and bring in a wide sample of prisoners. Now they stood in ragged ranks up and down the beach as far as Lynn Ferraro could see.



I can't believe this!
What he found difficult to believe was the diversity of races represented in the population sample the recon ships had brought in. Yet nowhere in the thousands of trembling and cursing prisoners could be seen even one single golden-skinned tentacle-fingered Kyban. Of the expeditionary force sent from far Kyba to hold this crossroads planet, not one survivor remained. They had all, to the last defender, committed suicide.

"War is not merely a political act but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means," as Karl von Clausewitz has so perfectly said.

And slaughter is not merely an act of war, is that right, Commander? Is it *also* a political instrument? **You deranged fool!** You should be commanding an **abattoir,** not a ship of the line!

Friend Ferraro?
Yes, I'm sorry, what is it, Mr. Lalwani?
The Commander would like to see you, on the main continent. He's decided to take the forts.
What does he want with me? Has there been a reply from Central or does he simply want an audience?
I don't know, Miz. He ordered me to come and find you. I have a recon ship waiting, whenever you're ready.
Thank you, Mr. Lalwani. I'll be along in a few moments.
She sat staring out across the ocean; as always: an observer.

They had charted the positions of the fifty "forts" during the first pass at the planet. Whether they were, in fact, forts was entirely supposition. At first they were thought to be natural rock formations — huge black cubes sunk into the earth of the tiny planet; featureless, ominous, silent — but their careful spacing around the equator made that unlikely. And the recon ships had brought back confirmation that they were created, not natural. *What* they were, remained a mystery.
I wanted you here because I'm still in charge of this operation, and whatever you may think of my actions I still follow orders. You're required to be in attendance, and I want *that* in the report.
It's noted, Commander.
I expected something more from you ... a comment. An assessment of military priorities. A plea to spare these cultural treasures. Something ... *anything* ... to justify your position.
She saw the depth of distaste he held for her. Was it her Amicus status, or herself he feared and despised? Had she been repelled less by his warrior manner, she might have pitied him — *"There are men whom one hates until that moment when one sees, through a chink in their armor, the sight of something nailed down and in torment."*

The validity of my position will insure you never go to space again, Commander. If there were more I could do, something immediate and final, I would do it. But I can't. You're in charge here, and the best I can do is record what I think is insane behavior.
His anger flared again, and for a moment she thought he might hit her a second time; and she dropped back into a self-defense position. The first time he had taken her unaware; there would be no second time; she was capable of crippling him.
Let me tell you a thing, Amicus, Friend of the Enemy! You're a paid spy for the enemy, an enemy that's out to kill us, every one of us, that will stop nowhere short of total annihilation of the human race! The Kyben feed off a hatred of humankind unknown to any other race in the galaxy ...
My threshold for jingoism is very low, Commander. If you have some information to convey, do so

Whether this planet has what I think it has, or not, quite clearly it's been a prize for a long time. Long before the war moved into this sector. It's been conquered and reconquered and conquered all over again. There's something here they all wanted.
And you think whatever it is, it's in the fifty forts. Have you spoken to any of the prisoners? Because if you have you'd have learned that whatever lives inside those forts has *permitted* the planet to be conquered. It doesn't care, as long as everyone minds their own business.
Go sit down, *Amicus*, the heat's getting to you.
They say even the Kyben were tolerated. I'm warning you, Commander, leave the forts alone.
Fade off, Friend Ferraro. Command means decision and my orders are to secure this planet. Secure doesn't mean fifty impregnable fortresses left untouched. **Mr. Lalwani, tell the ground batteries to commence on signal.**
It's war, Commander. That's your only answer, that it's war?
That's right. It's a war to the finish. *Something* has to break the stalemate with the Kyben, and even if I don't see the end of it I'll be satisfied knowing I was the one who broke it. Protect your eyes, Friend.
**Commence firing!**
**Let them alone!**

And in that instant she realized no one had asked the right question: where were the original natives of this world?

But it was too late to ask that question.

The barrage went on for a very long time.

Later, the reports Drabix received were even more disturbing than the mere presence of the forts: whatever formed those cubes, it was beyond the destructive capabilities of the ground batteries. The barrage had drained their power sources, and still the fort remained unscathed.

Let them a one? Now do you see the danger the necessity? Tell me how we secure a war zone with the Enemy in our midst, Friend?

They *aren't* the enemy!
Leave them alone, eh?
They *want* to be left alone!
Drabix to Descartes: Mr. Kokonen, on signal pour everything you've got into the primary lancets. Hit it dead center. And keep going till you open it up.

*On signal, sir.*
Drabix! Wait for Central to...
Minus three!
Let it alone! Let me try another —

Minus two!
Drabix ... stop ...
Minus one! Go to Hell, Friend!
You're out of your ...
Commence firing!

Suddenly, the lancet was cut off. Not from its source, but at its target, as if a giant, invisible hand had snuffed it out along its length.
A moment later, a new sun lit the sky as the dreadnought *Descartes* was strangled with its own weapon.

Then the cube began to rise from the earth. However much larger it was than what was revealed on the plain, Lynn Ferraro could not begin to estimate. It rose up and up, now no longer a squat cube, becoming a terrifying pillar of featureless black that dominated the sky. Somehow, she knew at forty-nine other locations around the planet the remaining forts were also rising.
After endless centuries of solitude, whatever lived in those structures was awakening at last.
They had been content to let the races of the galaxy come and go and conquer and be assimilated, as long as they were not severely threatened. They might have allowed humankind to come here and exist, or they might have allowed the Kyben the same freedom. But not both.
You got your wish. The war is over.
The original natives of the planet were taking a hand at last. The stalemate was broken. A third force had entered the war. And whether they would be inimical to Terrans or Kyben, no one could know. It was clear: roused from sleep, the inhabitants of the fifty forts would never consider themselves Friends of the Enemy.
STEACY-87

*There are other Telling Boxes in the detritus of the War. And perhaps one day these descendants of that surviving species will learn more of the tales from those times. But now, here, in the ruins, they know all they can know.*

*And now they will send their light into the transmat that will devolve them from their godlike state. And they will learn which their fathers, which their mothers . . . Kyban or Human . . .*

*Neither! To the last entity both races were erased. And in the five million years since the last spark of Human and Kyben intelligence was extinguished, only that creature come down to us from the Devonian seas, only that creature once mindless eating machine, only that creature capable of evolving and transcending its own nature — a feat beyond Human or Kyban — only that beast of deep seas could rise to aspirations of pure energy, pure intellect, pure godliness.*

*The lesson has been learned.*

▲